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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER)

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PBTS](#) [SNAR](#) [EG](#) [UK](#) [SL](#)  
SUBJECT: U.S. PLANE DETAINED IN SIERRA LEONE AFTER ILLEGAL  
LANDING

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (S) At approximately 1800 GMT on August 19, a U.S.-registered plane (N-748AA) illegally landed at Lungi Airport. The airport crew told the aircraft, reportedly a "Kruman 154," that they would have to identify an alternate landing site, since they did not have a landing permit. The plane eventually landed due to "technical difficulties," and the two American crew members, three British passengers, and three Egyptian passengers were detained. These individuals are currently being brought to Freetown by Sierra Leonean security personnel for questioning.

¶2. (S) The flight allegedly originated in Chad, and the group had previously visited South Africa and Egypt. In preliminary interviews, the passengers stated that they are interested in exporting fish from Sierra Leone, and had obtained their Sierra Leonean visas from the mission in Cairo. The party was met at the airport by representatives of the Horseshoe Fishing Company, which a high-level security contact told Poloff is currently under surveillance by Sierra Leonean intelligence. According to contact, the Minister of Marine Resources, Haja Afsatu Kabba, called the Vice President to request that the individuals be released. The Vice President denied her request. Source told Poloff that the Minister had made a trip to Egypt several months ago; when Poloff asked how the trip had been paid for, source stated Sierra Leonean intelligence is piecing together information about it now (Note: The Minister had been the subject of corruption probes during her recent tenure as the Minister of Energy Resources. End Note).

¶3. (S) At the request of interlocutors, Embassy is working with various USG entities to get further information on the plane's registration and the U.S. crew. Consular officials have been notified that these individuals have been detained and may soon face charges.

¶4. (S) Comment: Sierra Leonean contacts are visibly uneasy about the illegal landing, especially since the flight crew ignored instructions to leave the country's airspace and cited "technical difficulties" as the justification. If the crew and passengers have a relationship with Minister Kabba, they may have decided to take their chances with an illegal landing in the hopes that she would smooth the waters after the fact. Sources wondered why a group interested in fishing would visit Chad, a land-locked country, and intimated that fishing may not be their only interest in Sierra Leone - narcotics trafficking continues to be a significant security concern. Post will provide updated information soonest, septel. End Comment.  
PERRY